On Interpreting and Explaining

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RÉSUMÉ

L'effort interprétatif, particulièrement pour ce qui concerne les textes intéressant l'historien des idées politiques, devrait se concentrer moins sur la signification de ces textes que sur leurs intentions. Ces dernières éclairent efficacement l'organisation et la visée d'un texte, et décentrent le propos du commentateur d'une simple interrogation sur la pertinence des arguments utilisés. Le fait d'écrire, à la suite de Wittgenstein et d'Austin notamment, est envisagé comme une action dont l'interprète cherche à déceler les intentions.

MOTS-CLÉS

Contexte – Explication – Intention – Interprétation – Motifs – Signification – Texte.

Abstract

The interpretive effort, particularly with regard to texts of interest to the historian of political ideas, should focus less on the meaning of these texts than on their intentions. The latter effectively sheds light on the organisation and orientation of a text, and shifts the focus of the commentator from a simple questioning of the relevance of the arguments used. Following Wittgenstein and Austin in particular, the act of writing is seen as an action, whose intentions the interpreter seeks to highlight.

Keywords

Context – Explanation – Intention – Interpretation – Meaning – Motives – Text.

I am very grateful for this opportunity to say something about my views on historical method, that is to say my views about interpreting and explaining, as the title of my lecture puts it[1].

To speak first about historical explanation, I should say that I worked out what I think about this question a long time ago, and I have not substantially changed my mind. Partly, I worked out my views as a critique of Marxist theories of ideology and of the *Annales* school. But those views have already been made known to French readers through the generosity of Christopher Hamel who, six years ago, translated and introduced my text entitled in English "Truth and Historian"[2]. So, I shall not say anything in this lecture about historical explanation except for some brief remarks at the end.

I want to focus instead on my views about textual interpretation. I need first to say that these too have now been made available to French readers, once again through Christopher Hamel's generosity, with his translation of the first volume of my book *Visions of Politics*, which is called *Sur la méthode*, and was published by Droz last year[3]. I am not assuming that you will have read this book, but I am anxious not just to repeat what it says this evening. So what I have decided to do is instead offer you a small slice of intellectual autobiography. This may seem narcissistic, but I hope it may be of interest if I try to explain how I arrived at my views by way of talking about the great generation of writers on hermeneutics, with whose works I engage – and in some cases engaged personally as well – as I tried to formulate and justify my own approach.

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[1] Conférence donnée à l'IPC-Facultés Libres (Paris,) le 18 février 2019. Texte revu et corrigé par l'auteur.

[2] Voir Skinner 2012.

[3] Voir Skinner 2018.

My views about textual interpretation were also formulated quite a long time ago, so I am going to be talking about some of the great names of the generation we have recently left behind – Gadamer, Koselleck, Ricœur, the early Derrida, Foucault, and above all Wittgenstein. These were the philosophers with whose works I originally aspired to enter into dialogue. I am not saying that I agreed with them, except in the case of Wittgenstein whose reputation was overwhelming when I was a student in University of Cambridge in the late 1950s, and by whom we were all deeply influenced. To anyone of my generation interested in questions about interpretation, these were the great names with whose work one needed to try to come to terms.

When I first began to read this philosophical literature, what I found most challenging, especially in the continental European tradition, was the scepticism then being expressed about the possibility of interpretation. The sort of approach these writers were mainly opposing was the one still dominant in Anglophone philosophy and was represented by such then celebrated American writers on hermeneutics as Eric Hirsch, who was defending what he called, in the title of one of his books, *Validity in Interpretation*[4]. According to this view, a valid interpretation is one that succeeds in recovering the meaning of a text, where that meaning is in turn equated with the meaning intended by the author of the text concerned.

I think it would be fair to say that, traditionally, theories of hermeneutics had run largely along those lines. But in the course of the 1960s this whole approach began to be repudiated. I am thinking here especially of Gadamer's, *Wahrheit und Methode* first published in 1960[5], and of the early work of Derrida. It began to be argued that the basic idea of recovering intentionality is impossible. Several strands of thoughts converged on this conclusion, of which the most sensational was, of course, the *Grammatologie* of Derrida and others of his early texts – among which my favourite was *Éperons* – in which the very idea of interpretation was challenged[6].

[4] Voir Hirsch 1967.
[5] Voir Gadamer 2006.
[6] Voir Derrida 1967 et 2010.

We need to be careful, if I am speaking for a moment about Derrida, about directly asking what reasons he and his followers gave for this scepticism about interpretation. Because, of course, they refused to be co-opted into any such humanist discourse, which they aspired to supersede. But, in fact, it was always clear what reasons Derrida himself had for rejecting traditional hermeneutics. As you know, he associated the project with what he called "logocentrism", the belief that meanings originate in the world and are conveyed to us by the capacity of words to refer to things. That belief, he insisted, gives rise to what he famously called "the metaphysics of presence", the illusion that the truth about the world can be made present to the mind through the medium of a denotative language. Well, of course, many people had expressed doubts about denotation before Derrida. His worry about the tendency of signifiers to equivocate had featured centrally in philosophies of the early-modern period, above all in the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes, and the suggestion that meanings are really nothing more than conventions circulating in a form of life was already central to the later philosophy of Wittgenstein. But there is no doubt that Derrida carried the attack a long step further with his suggestion that the terms we use to signify not only fail do so univocally, but don't do so at all. They float apart from what is purportedly signified until they reach a state of free play. Language is thus said to "write itself over" any intention to communicate to the point where our capacity to be sure of any ascriptions of intended meaning is lost.

Derrida's was not the only voice raised in that generation to the project of ascribing intentions to authors and meanings to texts. Another important writer from this period was Paul Ricœur, who urged us to recognise that any text will acquire what he called an autonomous space of meaning which is no longer animated by the intentions of the author. Ricœur's principal proposal was that we should not concentrate on the hopeless effort to recover intentionality but should instead focus on what he called "surplus meaning" and "the public meanings of texts". And meanwhile, as I have mentioned, Gadamer in *Wahrheit und Methode* had already attacked the attempt to recover authorial intentionality for being part of what he stigmatised as romantic hermeneutics. Here he especially had in mind R. G. Collingwood's idea of "rethinking past

thoughts". For Gadamer, a pupil of Heidegger's, this is an obvious absurdity, presupposing as it does that we can lay aside our position in the historical process, and consequently set aside our pre-judgments. The most you can hope to achieve, in Gadamer's famous phrase, is a fusion of our horizon with that of the past, a kind of meeting half-way.

My generation was accordingly left asking how far these radical forms of scepticism should lead us to abandon any aspiration to talk about validity in interpretation. How far, in other words, should we give up making it a goal of interpretation to recover intentions and try to grasp what authors may have meant? I tried in my own work to show – and this is what I still want to say – that this question has no straightforward answer, simply because so much confusion surrounds the two crucial concepts at issue, namely meaning and intentionality. I tried to argue, in response to the writers I have cited, that there are two separable senses in which you may be interested in the meaning of an utterance or a text. On the one hand, you may be interested in the meaning of the terms used in making the utterance. If you express that point as one about intentionality, the interest here lies in grasping what the speaker or writer may have intended to convey. Of all the lexically possible meanings, which was the one that was intended? On the other hand, you may be interested in what I still think is best called – and here I am of course following Wittgenstein – linguistic action. You may be concerned, that is, with the range of things that writers and speakers may be capable of doing with words. To express this point as one about intentionality, the interest here lies in recovering what a speaker or writer may have intended by what they said. What was the linguistic act being performed? How did they intend the utterance to be understood?

My point here could also be expressed more radically. I am claiming that there are two separable dimensions to natural languages. One is traditionally captured by the idea of sense and reference. But the other is the dimension that Wittgenstein called the *Sprachspiel*. That term is usually translated into English as "language game", but surely a more literal translation would be "speech performance". Here we are not talking about meanings; rather, in J. L. Austin's phrase, we are talking about doing things with words. So, to summarise, I think there are two separable ways

in which you might be interested in intentionality in relation to interpretation, and I think that, among the writers I have mentioned, they tended to get confused. As I have also intimated, however, I think that Wittgenstein and Austin did a great deal to clarify the issues involved, and it is their approach that I take myself to be following here.

What I now want to do is to try to separate the two issues involved. And because I think that, in talking about questions of method, it is always most illuminating to proceed by way of considering examples, I am going to work through some examples to try to make my point.

Consider, then, the first claim: that in order to interpret a text you need to recover the meaning that was intended (Hirsch's idea of validity in interpretation.) Here the sceptics agreed that this task cannot possibly be performed, and nowadays I think it would generally be agreed that they won that battle. We have come to accept that you can't get at the intentions of authors and identify them with the meanings of texts. So, the idea of validity in interpretation has been abandoned.

But has it been abandoned too readily? That's a very unfashionnable question, but let me give you an example to suggest why this might be so. There is a passage in W.B. Yeats's great poem, *Among school children*, in which he compares Plato and Aristotle. As the poem expresses it, the contrast is between Plato, who "thought nature but a spume that plays upon a ghostly paradigm of things", and the more practical figure of "soldier Aristotle". The phrase "soldier Aristotle" caused the critics some difficulty, and one of them (in fact it was Delmore Schwartz) suggested that Yeats must have been alluding to the story that Aristotle had accompanied his pupil Alexander the Great on his last campaign. Hence "soldier Aristotle". But Yeats himself intervened at this point to explain that "soldier Aristotle" had been a misprint, and that he had intended to speak of "solider Aristotle" by contrast with Plato and his more idealist philosophy. And if you now read the poem in Yeats's *Collected Verse* it duly says "solider Aristotle".

What do we want to say about this sort of case? I think we have to speak here *d'un côté et de l'autre côté*. On the one hand I do not see how we can fail to admit that Yeats is the final authority on what

he intended to say, and that now you know the meaning of the line. You have a valid interpretation. I don't see how this can be denied. On the other hand – and here is the sceptical point, and I think it is a very important one – is that what you want? In the example I have given, perhaps you might want to say that "soldier" yields a better line, and that this is what matters. Or you might have a subtler thought, a Derridaian thought. This is that there is an assonance of "soldier" with "solider", so that both are present, even if this is not an effect Yeats intended at all.

The first of these reactions is the so-called reader-response one, at one time very popular in the hands of such critics as Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss. The second reaction is the one we are most likely to associate with Derrida, who constantly offers arguments of this kind in the *Grammatologie*. Here my own reaction is that at this point, I think, we have to agree with the anti-intentionalist case. If you consider a text of any complexity, it will surely be impossible to show that all the allusions, connotations and resonances that an ingenious critic might find in it could in turn be shown to reflect the intentions of the author at every point. However, if these elements are present, they are undoubtedly elements in the *text*, regardless of whether anyone intended them to be there. So, you have no reason to equate the meaning of the text with the intended meaning and you have excellent reasons for not doing so. As Ricœur puts it, there will always be surplus meaning. So, there is the essence of the sceptical case and as I say I think we have to accept it. The era of deconstruction may be over, but surely we all learned from it, and surely it was enriching to be taught to emphasise such textual ambivalence and instability.

I next need to emphasise, however, that everything I have so far said applies exclusively to the first of the two separable ways in which you might be interested in intentionality in relation to interpretation. Now I want to turn to the second, in which our concern is not with meanings but with *Sprachspielen*. We need in addition, that is, to think of language as a species of social action. And we need to ask the question we always ask about people's actions, namely, what are they doing? But notice that this is to ask about the intentions embodied in some specific performance, because actions are the actions they are in virtue of the intentions embodied in them.

Let me now consider whether we need to recover *this* sense of authorial intentionality as part of the project of textual interpretation. Well, I am bound to say that here I am struck by the extent to which this question has not receive any attention at all. That is not true of Derrida and I will come back to him. But it is certainly true of Gadamer and of a number of other distinguished hermeneuticists: they simply do not raise this question. One of the strange features of Gadamer's great text is the absence from it of any concern with the issues raised by Wittgenstein, greatly of course to its detriment.

By contrast with this silence, I want to argue that the recovery of intentionality in the second sense I have isolated is crucial to interpretation. That is the thesis I now want to defend, and the best way I can do so is again, I think, by way of considering an example. In fact, I will offer two examples, both taken from the history of philosophy. Here is the first. John Passmore published a brilliant book a long time ago about the philosophy of David Hume, which he actually entitled *Hume's Intentions*[7]. Passmore's focus, however, was not on what Hume may or not may have intended to say in his *Treatise on Human Nature*; rather it was about what you might call the character of Hume's text. What you learn from Passmore's book is that Hume's *Treatise*, far from being a sceptical although recognisable rewriting of John Locke's *Essay*, and above all Berkeley's idealism (which was what scholars had usually argued) is basically a critical engagement with the philosophy of Malebranche. Malebranche is never mentioned in Hume's text, but the achievement of Passmore's book was to uncover the sense in which you might nevertheless want to claim that Hume's *Treatise* is *about* Malebranche. What Hume is doing is meditating on Malebranche's questions, reacting to them and trying to offer a critical response.

Here is my second example. One of the political theorists with whom I have been much concerned is Machiavelli. Now, as I am sure you know, one of the things Machiavelli tells us in *Il Principe* is that any ruler who wishes to maintain his *stato* must learn to imitate the lion and the fox. For me there are two questions you can ask here. You can ask about the meaning of the utterance, which is to ask how we should unpack the metaphor. And this is not difficult

[7] Voir Passmore 1952.

to find out. In the iconography of the Renaissance, the lion is the standard emblem of strength, while the fox is the standard emblem of guile. So, Machiavelli appears to be telling princes that successful statecraft depends, in part, on force and fraud. You may well feel – and this is what many scholars have concluded – that you now understand Machiavelli's utterance.

But what if you switch to the other dimension of language? Suppose you ask not about the meaning of the claim, but what Machiavelli may have meant or intended by the act of issuing it. What is the *Sprachespiel*? You will need to know a lot about Renaissance philosophy to give an answer here, because you will need to know whether other writers talked about the lion and the fox and, if they did so, with what purposes in mind. You are going to have to work intertextually. But if you do so, you will be greatly rewarded, because the text from which almost everyone learned their Latin in Renaissance Italy was Cicero's *De Officiis*. And there is a passage in book I of the *De officiis* in which, in the course of talking about injustice, Cicero gives the example of the lion and the fox. As he declares, "there are two ways in which injustice can be done, one is by force, the other by fraud. But fraud belongs to the fox, and force to the lion, and both are completely unworthy of mankind[8]."

Notice that, according to Cicero, to employ force or fraud is held to be unmanly as well as unjust. But this suddenly shows you that Machiavelli is not just saying that success in politics depends on recognizing the unavoidability of force and fraud. He is also doing a number of things in the act of saying it. Writing in a cultural context in which virtue was almost equated with manliness, he puts forward the opposing view that, if you want political success, you will need to be beastly as well as manly. So, he is *challenging* and *rejecting* – notice the speech acts – a conventional Renaissance moral assumption. He is thereby *questioning* the adequacy of humanistic accounts of virtue, *redefining* the qualities that do in fact bring political success, and introducing these thoughts by way of

[8] « Cum autem duobus modis, id est aut vi aut fraude, fiat iniuria, fraus quasi vulpeculae, vis leonis videtur ; utrumque homine alienissimum, sed fraus odio digna maiore. » (Cicéron, *Les Devoirs*, I, XIII, 41, original latin et traduction française dans Cicéron 1965, 125).

criticizing, *repudiating*, and (I would want to add) *ridiculing* one of the most popular classical writers on the idea of justice. In sum, Machiavelli's argument is presented, at this crucial juncture, in the form of a satire on Cicero.

Let me now underline what I take as the significance of my two examples. I am not focusing on the meaning of what Hume or Machiavelli said. I am asking what speech-acts they were performing. I am asking what they were doing in saying what they said. I am asking what kind of an intervention their texts may be said to have constituted. The point of both examples is to show that the recovery of intentionality in this second sense is crucial to interpretation.

I originally developed this argument in the form of a response to a passage in Derrida's *Éperons* in which he had discussed a remark found among Nietzsche's papers which said: "*J'ai oublié mon parapluie*[9]". My point was that, if you want to understand Nietzsche's remark, two distinct questions need to be answered. One is: what do his words mean? Here Derrida simply replies that "everyone knows what these words mean". Alternatively, as Derrida rightly says, you may want to know what Nietzsche meant by writing those words. As I would prefer to put it, you need to know what speech-act he was performing. Was he just telling someone? Or was he warning them that it is going to rain? Or was he apologising? Or was he criticising himself? Or what?

Derrida's answer is that we can never know. So, my question becomes: what do we say about that? Well, as always with Derrida, the example is brilliantly chosen, because of course there are going to be examples of utterances where there is no context that will enable us to decode what is going on – and he has just given an example. But is the same true of every utterance that has ever been issued? Was that true in the Machiavelli case? I am inclined to reply that Derrida has chosen a very extreme example to make his point. To this objection, however, the sceptic has a strong response. To speak of such intentions is to speak of mental events. But we have no direct access to such events, so anything we say about them will

[9] Voir Derrida 2010, 103 *sq*.

be irreducibly speculative, and this is why we can never know what Nietzsche may have meant.

Here my response is that I do not think this is a helpful way to think about other minds in relation to intentionality. To recover the sort of intentions I am talking about, there is no need to perform the impossible task of getting inside the heads of historical agents, because the intentions I am talking about are embodied in acts of linguistic communication. But that means they are in principle publicly legible. Let me relate this general claim to my two examples. Passmore claims that Hume's *Treatise* is about Malebranche. That is undoubtedly a claim about Hume's intentions. But the business of recovering them has nothing to do with getting inside Hume's head at the time when he was writing the *Treatise*. If the claim can be established, it is because Hume's intentions are *not* simply private mental events; they can be recovered by means of engaging in the right kind of inter-textual comparisons. I think this is even clearer in the Machiavelli case. He *refers* to Cicero's argument, and he actually *quotes* Cicero. He *reminds* his reader of what Cicero says about injustice. He *challenges* Cicero's argument, he *repudiates* it, he *ridicules* it. Those are the intentions with which Machiavelli wrote that passage, but they are all out in the open, so that an historian who gets the intertextuality right is going to be able to read off what is going on, as I have just done.

There is the Wittgensteinian point: texts are, among other things, social acts. So, to understand texts, you have to recover the intentions underlying the specific speech-acts being performed. But there is nothing mysterious about this act of recovery. It is simply a matter of recovering the precise nature of the intellectual intervention constituted by the text. As Wittgenstein himself points out, you can see this most easily in the case of the language of gesture. I hold up my hand. Am I greeting you? Or warning you? Or issuing an instruction? You may perform exactly the same physical movement in each case. To understand your action is to recover the specific intention with which you acted. But to recover the intention, it is only necessary to understand the context of the action itself and the conventions governing it.

We are still left, however, with Derrida's objection that, as he says in the case of the Nietzsche example, we can never be *sure* ("*assure*") of what Nietzsche meant by what he said. One possible response would be to say that we are not interested in the intentions of authors but only in the performativity of texts. But I do not myself believe we can wholly dispense with agency in this Foucauldian style. My assertion that Hume is commenting on Malebranche is certainly a claim about intentionality, as is my claim that Machiavelli's *Prince* is in part a satire on Cicero. Derrida's objection is that I can never be *assuré* that these are valid claims. But of course I cannot be *assuré*. As in the case of any act of interpretation, I am only putting forward a hypothesis, and can never hope to do more. But there can be good and bad hypotheses, and there can even be hypotheses for which – as I believe is the case in my Machiavelli example – the evidence is overwhelming.

What I have tried to do is to demystify the relationship of intention to interpretation by stopping talking about meanings. Notice that I have talked only about intentions, not about motives. When we want to explain actions, I concede, what we need to understand is what motivated them. But when we want to interpret linguistic actions, what we need to recover is intentions by contrast with motives. We can of course go on to ask – to go back to my Machiavelli example – what may have been the motives that led Machiavelli to satirise Cicero. But that would be to write a completely different kind of history, and here we really would come up against the fact that, whereas the intentions with which people speak are generally publicly legible, people's motives really are in the head. Some historians, and all biographers, seem to think they can manage to infer them, but I prefer to work exclusively with the notion of intentionality, and I cannot see how to do more than that.

One might at this stage enter – as some of my critics have done – one last sceptical doubt. Suppose we agree that Hume's *Treatise* is in part a commentary on Malebranche. How important is that? How much does that tell us about Hume's text? The point of the question is to suggest that we learn very little that really matters. But this seems to me altogether mistaken. What we learn, I think, is nothing less than revelatory. We learn why Hume's text is organised in a certain way, why it deploys a particular vocabulary, why certain specific arguments are emphasised and other are

ignored. We learn, in short, about the organisation and the orientation of the entire text; which should I think be the principle goal of interpretation.

I am pleading for a kind of history of philosophy that would not primarily be concerned with the alleged truth or falsity of specific arguments. Rather the aim would be to write the history of a particular kind of intellectual activity as carried on in a specific culture at a particular time. This is not quite the same as speaking about the death of the author, but it would undoubtedly be a kind of history in which individual authors would be de-centred in favour of studying broader conversations and how they developed over time. I am pleased to be able to end on what seems to me a characteristically French note.

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